The role of humour in high performing design teams

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Abstract

Based on experience working in and with high-performing design teams the author shares his reflections and investigations into the role that humour plays in both the generation of ideas and effective team working.

Keywords: Humour, Team-Working, Design, Creativity.

1   Introduction

All of us want to work in great teams doing excellent projects. As such it seems sensible to devote at least some of our attention to understanding what it is that makes for great teams and excellent projects. If we can identify the ingredients of success then we have a better chance of making a good stew!

When you ask those involved why projects are successful, it is curious how hard they find it to articulate answer. It is notable that few ever says that excellence was a result of good project management, except the project managers! "Good" project management seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for excellent projects.

In this presentation I suggest that two of the key behaviours in high performing design teams are: having ideas and relating. I then explore how humour may influence both of these behaviours, based largely on a paper by Polimeni and Reis (1).

2   Having Ideas

In many cultures engineers are seen as people who are good at having ideas and the Latin root of the word engineer has more to do with ingenuity than engines.

When asked, most engineers will say that having ideas is important both in design and analysis. It is interesting then that very few can explain the process of having an idea and very few claim to have studied or been trained to have frequent and good ideas.

It appears that in our profession having the skill of having ideas is understood as something that engineers have "naturally" and then develop further (or not) informally through practice.

In other fields there is a far more deliberate effort to develop idea generating skills and people like Edward De Bono have spent a productive, and one imagines lucrative, life helping people do just that.

In the presentation I present a model of the idea as dependant on:

- The external stimuli (both direct and incidental)
- The pre-existing architecture of the brain (which determine the knowledge and accessibility to that knowledge)
- The state of excitation of the brain (level of stress, existing activity etc)

This simple model gives us a useful way of thinking about how we might influence the quality, character and frequency of our ideas.